

Style Invitational

BY PAT MYERS

Report from Week 1046

in which we asked for totally bogus stories of the origins of familiar expressions, even more bogus than the “true” ones you can find on the Internet:

THE
WINNER
OF THE
INKIN'
MEMORIAL

“Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?” was actually an expression of surprise among ancient Greeks that Helen of Troy was so beautiful, since it was customary for the Greek queen to use her forehead to butt new vessels into the water. (Frank Osen, Pasadena, Calif.)

Eh-tymologies: Honorable mentions

In London back in 1827, the number 9 on the face of Big Ben had loosened and was in imminent danger of being knocked off by the hour hand. The intricate numeral was too delicate to withstand a bolt or nail, so the plan was to rush up the tower to tie the 9 back onto the clock face. But as the worker climbed onto the scaffolding to stitch the 9 in time and save it, his foot hit a bucket and he fell to his death. Thus the expression “to kick the bucket.” (Seth Brown, North Adams, Mass.)

The sport of competitive eating goes back many centuries. In the 12th century, the greatest champion of them all hailed from remote China. Time and time again, overconfident challengers failed attempting to “bite off more than Won Kan Chu.” (Jeff Contompasis, Ashburn)

During the times when the disease of consumption was widespread, it was rare to see anyone laugh. For one thing, if a victim dared to so much as giggle, a hacking cough would sometimes bring up a small piece of lung. So if something wasn't especially humorous, it was categorized as “no laughing matter.” (Frank Osen)

More than 200 years ago, William

2 Winner of the book “I’m Not Hanging Noodles on Your Ears, and Other Intriguing Idioms From Around the World”:

In the day when a woman wore “pin money” — pinned where a gent would blush to glance — she sometimes would spend it too early in the evening. And so someone might say, “Jane had to walk all the way home because she was flat busted.” (Dana Austin, Falls Church)

3 Pierre L'Enfant, designer of the “Federal City” street grid (and thereafter known as “L'Enfant Terrible”), showed a crude sketch of his plan for the new city to George Washington. The president, even though he had been a successful surveyor, inexplicably approved the haphazard doodle, calling out special praise for what were actually teacup stains. Unwilling to acknowledge his sloppiness, L'Enfant hastily described them as “traffic circles.” (Lew Clayman, Silver Spring, a First Offender)

4 The phrase “built like a brick (out)house” originated with the Egyptian pyramid builders. Today it refers to someone who is sturdy and robust, but at that time it meant flimsy and shoddy, as ancient Egyptian (out)houses were made of five-ton stone blocks. (Gary Crockett, Chevy Chase)

Herschel discovered a new planet and secured his place in history. But he also described alien cities he'd supposedly seen on the planet surface. Even back then, people knew not to believe that, and so talking nonsense became known as “talking about Uranus” (later corrupted to “talking out your lower back region”). (Martin Bancroft, Issaquah, Wash.)

In the mildly depressed city of Seattle, a man named Fred Starbucks had an idea to open a coffee shop with strong brews and a hefty price. “No one will pay \$2 for a cup of joe,” scoffed the critics. And indeed, the



The souvenir ibex-floating-in-the-super-buoyant-Dead-Sea-T-shirt, this week's second prize.

first customer showed up with only \$1.75 in his pocket. Fred informed him firmly: “That and a quarter will get you a cup of coffee.” (Jeff Shirley, Richmond)

Anglo-Saxon tradition mandated that when a groom jilted a bride, the best man was obligated to provide comfort and even wed her instead. Typically, this occurred in arranged marriages to undesirable women, and the best man would be left “holding the bag.” (Jeff Contompasis)

Unscrupulous agents in New York would lie in wait for aspiring actors, singers, comedians, etc., streaming in from all over the country to make their name. The worst of these “sharks” would pounce on fresh-faced kids trying to make it on Broadway. These agents became known as “great whites,” which is why Broadway was dubbed the “Great White Way.” (Mike Gips, Bethesda)

Women don't just go to the restroom together: When ladies go in for a “Brazilian” before swimsuit season, sometimes they'll go to the salon as a group and chant together as a way to distract themselves during the uncomfortable procedure: “For looking smooth while at the beach, I'll put up with this final SCREECH!” This came to be known as “waxing poetic.” (Jeff Shirley)

In 19th-century France, chefs at elite culinary institutes would instruct students in basic skills such as roasting a chicken. If an instructor found a student's chicken less than perfect, the arrogant chef would place his middle finger in the chicken's exposed cavity and catapult it off the table into the garbage. This scornful gesture became known as “flipping the bird.” (Robert Schechter, Dix Hills, N.Y.)

Long ago in some Asian kingdoms, a guest suspected of being untrustworthy would be presented with food that not only looked unappetizing but also had clearly been dropped on the carpet. If the guest ate it, he proved polite and trusting, if a little naive. This process was called “giving the hairy eyeball.” (Andy Bassett, New Plymouth, New Zealand)

In the world of the wolf, being Alpha Dog means everything. And how does the wolfpack determine who the Alpha is? As soon as they can stand, the male pups jockey for position, to see which of them can pee on his brothers first and longest. Which is why obtaining an edge is called “getting a leg up on the competition.” (Nan Reiner, Alexandria)

Still running — deadline Monday night: our Week 1049 contest for alternative ratings to warn viewers about certain elements of movies. See bit.ly/invite1049.



BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

Week 1050: Just redo it

Have you ever read the Invite winners and *then* come up with an entry that obviously would have won had you sent it three weeks earlier? (Clearly some of you have, since we repeatedly get entries from people who send them after the results are posted; perhaps they figure we'll alter the progress of time and fit them in last week.) Well, here's your annual chance to catch up on the past year: **This week: Enter any Style Invitational contest from Week 1000 through Week 1046.** Use as few or many contests as you like, up to 25 entries total. You may refer to events that have occurred since the contest was published (except for the Week 1004 obit poems, which should still be about people who died in 2012); for contests that ask you to use that week's paper, use this week's. Since there's only so much space in the print paper, longer-form entries are likely to run only online. Thanks to the bizarre devotion of Ur-Loser Elden Carnahan, you can see all the contests — with links to both text and PDF versions (you'll need to see pictures if you want to enter a caption contest) — at the **Master Contest List** on his Web site, nrars.org, where he also keeps his exhaustive Loser Stats. (If Elden's site happens to crash, you can see the vast majority of contests at washingtonpost.com/styleinvitational.) You'll also be able to check that your entry doesn't repeat the idea of one that already got ink.

Winner gets the Inkin' Memorial, the Lincoln statue bobblehead that is the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives a prize donated eons ago by Megaloser Beverley Sharp, brought back from a sightseeing trip to Israel: a souvenir T-shirt featuring a cartoon of a native ibex doing the perennial tourist stunt of lying on one's back and reading the newspaper in the super-buoyant salty waters of the Dead Sea. (“They were out of rocket mortars,” noted Beverley.)

Other runners-up win their choice of a yearned-for Loser Mug or the ardently desired Grossery Bag. Honorable mentions get a lusted-after Loser magnet, either the Po' Wit Laureate or Puns of Steel. First Offenders receive a smelly tree-shaped air “freshener” (FirStink for their first ink). E-mail entries to losers@washpost.com or fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Dec. 16; results published Jan. 5 (online Jan. 2). No more than 25 entries per entrant per week. Include “Week 1050” in your e-mail subject line or it might be ignored as spam. Include your real name, postal address and phone number with your entry. See contest rules and guidelines at wapo.st/InvRules. The subhead for this week's honorable mentions is by Elden Carnahan. Join the lively Style Invitational Devotees group on Facebook at on.fb.me/invdev, and click “like” on Style Invitational Ink of the Day at bit.ly/inkofday.



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